

A Brief History of the Young Life of Collins Telle Cannon

by Collins Telle Cannon

[1888-1961]

Son of George Q. Cannon

written for the annual Cannon Family Reunion

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Julian, our program committee chairman, [son of Sylvester Q. Cannon, nephew of Collins] in discussing with me some of the proposed arrangements for this annual party suggested that I take part on the program. I asked him if he had anything special in mind that I could contribute. He suggested that I might relate some incidents of our life on the farm that had not hitherto been repeatedly related. Well so far there seemed nothing especially difficult in that assignment since as all of the younger ones of our generation know there is a tremendous anecdotal field yet to be exploited. Julian suggested that I present, so to speak, a pebble's eye view of a mountain, not too fulsomely, but honestly and perhaps a little humorously. My life paralleled father's but a very short time and during that time there was little that seemed humorous. The responsibility of being a son of George Q. Cannon and at the same time keeping out of his sight seemed overwhelming. However, time has removed the anxieties and responsibilities and there were countless situations that were amusing.

Father was a mountain. He wasn't born one, nor was mountainhood thrust upon him. He achieved mountainhood. Some few of his contemporaries were great because of birth. Many of them were great because circumstances forced them - they just had to be great and it really wasn't difficult among mediocrity. Father was great, not because of, nor in spite of circumstances but very simply because the elements of greatness were in him. I have been assured by my elders who were in a much better position than I to evaluate his true worth, that he would have been great in any age or under any circumstances.

It is historically well established that when strong and straight thinking leadership was needed in the eighties and early nineties during which period it was a case of this people's surviving or perishing, that this leadership was supplied by G.Q.C. He piloted this stricken people through the difficult transition period of open rebellion to the Federal Government to agreed compliance with its laws. He accomplished this great reform if you please without the hearty co-operation of many of his high-in-the-Church contemporaries. Some of these were senile --- incapable of constructive assistance but indeed many others were actively hostile to any idea of abandoning, in any degree whatsoever, a divinely promulgated way of life. Time has already shown the wisdom of G.Q.C.'s leadership in this vital matter. Well so much for a pebble's view of a mountain.

It was during these full times that I came along. It is easy to understand that I of all Geo. Q's children was the least known to him. There was a disparity of nearly 65 years in our ages. He was intensely preoccupied with affairs of church and state and a strict compliance with a manifesto of his authorship caused him to spread himself mighty thinly around his large families. The very thinnest spreading of all, it then seemed to me, was at our house. How easy it is then to

understand a lapse of memory on his part that concerned me.

I was about eight and one day I came upon Father and Uncle Angus M. on Main Street. Before I go further with this anecdote I must elaborate a little for the benefit of younger members of the family who are here tonight. Uncle Angus was a kisser. He kissed all and sundry, young and old, male and female, alike and it didn't matter whether it was on Main Street or wherever. Father was a little like that too. Uncle Angus had grandson twins, sons of Angus M. Jr. They were called Jack and Chick. They were about my age. Now these facts may at this point seem unrelated but they weren't -- listen. I had chanced upon Father and Uncle Angus and I was attempting to slide by unnoticed on account of my dread of the kissing ordeal and my awe of my Father. Angus spotted me, halted me and you guessed it--he kissed me. It was all right for I was only seven or eight and so small. Father looked on and said, "Angus, which is that, Jack or Chick!!" My world tumbled about me. I was instantly shocked out of my bashfulness and awe and I cried out, "No, no, Pa! I ain't Jack or Chick! I'm Aunt Martha's little boy." To this day, almost, I can see Father trying to cover his embarrassment and at the same time I see Angus nearly doubled up in mirth. As far as I know Angus repeated this episode very few times. It seemed to be a secret between him and me and I often saw in that lovable twinkle in his eyes something especially for me that made me think he remembered what at its happening seemed such a tragedy. Once later Angus nudged me playfully in the ribs and said "Jack or Chick" and then laughed uproariously. His mirth healed my wounded vanity.

Father's memory of people, their personalities and faces was colossal. He was proud of it. He was noted for it. In extenuation, then, of what seemed a gross and unthinkable memory lapse on his part I should say this of the incident just related. I approached Father and Angus from the rear. In attempting to pass them I exposed only my rear. I dare say that if Father had ever changed me he would have recognized me.

During the nineties on the farm the family entered a period of comparative prosperity. Mercantile, Banking and Mining ventures of Father's turned out well. Some of the boys and girls were sent East to college. We were able to dress better though never quite so well as Father. He was always immaculate and really stylish. Life was easy -- I might say idyllic for us youngsters. There was rafting and boating on the pond, swimming in the Jordan, skating in season and horses to ride. We had parties - dances - we were becoming old enough to take interest in that. We had a really good tennis court and there were always enough of us to form two teams for rounders of shinny. We had night games - run sheep run and the like -- everything in fact to delight youngsters. Oh it was a happy period in our young lives. There was lots of work to be done around such a place as ours. We didn't have to do much of it though. There were hired men for that sometimes as many as four or five to look after the extensive lawns and flowers, to put up the hay in summer and the ice in winter - to take care of Father's team and elegant closed coach and to drive him to and from his office in the city. Our personal chores were few and easy -- easy to neglect too and it didn't seem to matter much. Oh it was an easy life.

Didn't we have to milk cows you ask? Well yes, some of us did and it almost spoils the picture I have drawn. Traditionally this task fell to the youngest in each family when he reached eight years.

One of my cows was a pet -- she was small -- she was named "Tiny." She had only three and one-half milk outlets. You know milking is a matter of rhythm. Rhythm in milking is as important as it is in ballet dancing. I always got along very nicely with the first half of the job of milking Tiny -- but the last half -- O dear -- can you imagine Pavlova performing with one of her legs off at the knee?

My other cow was named "Quick Foot." She was well named. She had to be tied down for milking. It was an arduous task to be sure. All who ever had to do with this creature became masters of blasphemy -- even gentle Rad. These two animals were typical of Father's whole farming operation -- poor. The horses, though we loved them, were poor - the carrots and cabbages were too. The pears, apples, gooseberries and currants hardly fit to eat - the hay was full of foxtail and the potatoes full of blight. Father loved all of this any way. He thought he was a farmer. None of us ever thought he was though.

Father traveled extensively. He was away on church business for long, periods of time. He wasn't much of a hand to bring back presents from these trips nor to give presents at Christmas or on birthdays. There were exceptions, of course. He gave me a five dollar gold piece and a Bible once. The money went -- poof! -- the Bible is still brand new.

Father bought five Steinways all at one time, presents to his daughters. Years later the dealer proudly showed me the yellowed invoice. He shipped from the East a whole carload of silk brocade furniture -- five or six sets, I think.

Just at this time, Utah was entering Statehood. There was to be a grand inaugural ball in the Salt Lake Theatre. All of the high fashion of the new state were to be present including, of course, father and his. Need for the almost universal, practical and unrevealing Mother Hubbard dresses no longer existed in our families. It was now proper that Geo. Q's wives be more appropriately garbed, particularly for the grand approaching event. He brought back from the East the necessary dress goods suitable in style and quantity, I'm sure. The family dressmaker was set to work to prepare the gowns. She was a conniver with a depraved sense of humor. She arranged the selection of patterns -- and the fittings with each of the wives separately. They didn't know all of the pieces came from the same bolt.

The gala night arrived, the high fashion of the state was there. Father was there with his five -- or was it six wives on his arm. A fashionable lady from the Eagle Gate District was heard to say, "Wasn't it quaint of Brother Geo. Q. to dress his wives all alike?"

A dreaded event in our lives on the farm was the family meeting. Some of these meetings were for all -- some were for specially selected groups. They were always important and were not to be avoided. By means of them Father was able to keep somewhat in touch with us. Opportunities to see us individually so seldom occurred.

One of these meetings I recall vividly. It included only the group then known as the "Farm Kids" -- Rad, I believe, and down to me in age. This meeting was held in the farm house. It had a very special purpose.

It seems that some of us were showing some vicious tendencies -- symptoms perhaps of turpitude. Our ages ranged from about seven to twelve and so we were at about the right age for the development of those tendencies. Father was extremely watchful of and alert for such tendencies. He's had plenty of experience doubtless with our large number of elder brothers.

The subject was opened abruptly -- there was no softening of the impact of the whole thing on us. None was intended either. To me, it seemed brutal. We were instructed to confess and express repentance each in turn, commencing with the eldest of us. It was a torture chamber heavy with inward emotion and outward tears. There was no show of bravado -- there never was in Father's presence.

The confessions came forth -- haltingly in some cases but thoroughly in all. There was no equivocation. One didn't equivocate with Geo. Q. Cannon. Too soon my dreaded turn came. I was the youngest, I was little, I was but a lamb. I hadn't sinned. I'd nothing to confess. I hardly knew what it was all about. I was only just emerging from the birds and bees stage. No - there was nothing to confess but there was an opportunity to right all of the wrongs that had been heaped on me and mine all during the seven or eight years of my life. My jealous fires were burning. I had been neglected - my Mother had too. She hadn't fine clothes nor jewels. She didn't go traveling to far away places in fine style and take me along. She didn't have a side board in her dining room and she wanted one -- in short she and I didn't belong -- we were not wanted. This was my confession. It all came out of me in soul tearing sobs. Well -- it was earth shattering to our little world.

I can't remember going home. I can't remember how the night passed. I can't remember how the subsequent summons came, as come I was sure it would. ---- It came -----

At the appointed time I walked "the last mile" alone. I mounted the long steps to the farm house. I was so alone but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. It was, to be unique, the only -- only time I was ever to be with my Father alone.

I sat on the edge of a straight chair. Father leaned gracefully at the fireplace with one elbow on the mantle. He was always graceful. No word had been spoken. None had been needed. I knew I was to be dispatched. I knew I wouldn't grow up to be a locomotive engineer or a pirate or a watchmaker. I only hoped they would put me in a little box lined with soft white cloth and bury me on the green hillside. Then perhaps some kind person would pass and scatter some seeds on the little mound and then in the spring after the snow had melted, some crocuses and dew drops might grow up and hide the little stone on which would be inscribed the awful words "Here Lies the Little Boy Who Sassed George Q. Cannon."

Well sir, it didn't turn out like that at all. Neither of us had broken the silence. Father left the fireplace and put his hand on my shoulder gently. He spoke -- gently -- not as a brutal man to an imaginative uncouth and rude child, but as a gentleman to a gentleman. He didn't descend to my level -- he raised me to his.

He recounted patiently -- somewhat painfully too, I seem to remember, some of the things he had

lived through down the years. He told me of the cruel Edmunds Tucker Act, a thing I'd never heard of. He told of the houndings of the U. S. Marshals, of his being a fugitive with a price on his head like a common criminal, of his attempt to escape by jumping from the train away off in the desert in the Promontory Country. He told me of the resulting injury and of the succor of humble friends away out there. He told me of his subsequent capture and incarceration.

He told of the issuance of a manifesto which he hoped would ameliorate a situation out here in Utah that had become intolerable. He told me of his determination to accept that manifesto to the letter - and then - finally and patiently, oh so patiently, I remember, he told me exactly why he decided to live out the rest of his days in the manner in which he was living it - with one wife only. I was so small to be told these things and I could hardly grasp them but oh how completely soul satisfying it all was. I was in a dream. I retraced the former "last mile." It was a short one now. I had a song in my heart. I knew now that I wasn't just so much polygamous spawn. I was George Q. Cannon's little boy.

Collins T. Cannon